

beginning
PHOENIX
blank
white walls

AVIATION

in Flight

CHECKS

10

THERE ARE TIMES WHEN YOU CAN CARRY OPPRESSION LIGHTLY AND SUCCEED IN THROWING SOME OF IT OFF, BECAUSE OF THE ENERGY GENERATED BY THE GROUP.

- M.R. It's important politically for women to be seen working together and being successful without destructive battles between ourselves. It's a statement of strength in itself. It contravenes the myth of women as competitive jealous bitches.
- K.W. At the same time I'm wary of the Amazonian myth, quite a different proposition. If you say anything positive about your own life, you can become personally idealised into Amazon woman. It's an image of super woman which is discouraging to other women and falsely appealing to men.
- M.R. The Women's Art Movement is so fragile here at the moment, that's why the Postal Event was so shocking to feminists who wanted to produce automatically, a positive image of woman. They felt that the material used had been worked through but of course it hadn't been worked upon as visual art, in public. It's very important to make these ideas visible as a basis upon which to change art itself. There are a lot of women artists who are not interested in changing art or inventing new forms, but just interested in "getting a piece of the poison pie" as Lippard calls it, and who can blame them? (9)

WORKING IN PUBLIC WE ARE CONSTANTLY CONFRONTING THE WOMAN AS SPECTACLE/STEREOTYPE. WE OVERCOME IT BY STRATEGIC MANIPULATION OF ARTWORLD EXPECTATIONS.

- K.W. How far can you go with audience participation? I think it's important that the dividing line between audience and workers is somewhat blurred, but I want to keep the group integrity. I want our view of a woman's life to prevail because it's funny and optimistic, changeable, peculiar and difficult.
- S.R. Not ending up with something that can be pinned down.
- M.R. It was difficult when men came to view us as spectacle. It made it hard to carry on working. (see captions to photos)

I painted my friends holding me up

travelling lady needs group.

Contrast between my usual lonely work and PHOENIX to back me up



"Do you want to be part in an art show?"

"Not this one, would you?"

"OK. Ready?"

"I have had it up and down through it"

"I feel like a virgin"

[AUDIENCE APPLAUDS]

nice!!

nice

ENGINEERING

7

WE GO BACK CONSTANTLY TO THE PROBLEM OF ACCESSIBILITY. OUR AMBITION TO MAKE A POPULAR BASIS FOR ART.

- S.R. One of the best ways we've found of getting people involved is through the use of slides. We've also used written contributions.
- K.W. So far we've used file cards for women to write in their experiences of marriages, births, deaths; slides of our past PHOENIX show and slides of S.R.'s recent family history; music; audience-participation in events which we photograph; radio interviews; conversation in the gallery with the public; requests for assistance etc.
- S.R. It has to be fun, buttons to push, things to play. Most people find it hard to write.
- K.W. It imposes a style if they see what others have done.
- S.R. We should make tapes of what everybody thinks about it, then it's not just the artists, - use it in the next show. One of the things that people have often said is "well how can you do it? How can you go in public and put all your dirty washing out? We're all very scared of that, but people don't realise that fear is overcome by group support."

K.W. I feel quite relaxed about that because I'm so busy worrying about other problems. For instance I've worried about it failing because it may be physically impossible for us, even though we've set it up to fit round our lives. The actual physical problems are: childcare; long absences from home; time off teachings; loss of pay; finding travel money; a place to stay. I've also had doubts about how far you can state the personal/political equation in visual terms. I think it's very embarrassing. The way that we're working reminds me of something that Lippard said about Judy Chicago writing on her paintings and it's all personal, embarrassing... you know, maybe B gets upset and I might get anxious about what's going to be in the artwork: Did she tear that letter up? etc. I suppose eventually we'll get down to the extremely personal level, which is difficult, because then you're trespassing on other people's views of reality.

M.R. There must be some way of synthesising personal matter without necessarily making fiction.

S.R. You have to start with your own personal experience then you gather other people's reactions, and possibly related experience, and you soon find out which are general experiences, out of which can come general conclusions. Working like this you come up with themes which are still personal statements, but they don't mention individuals so much. It's the process of getting from words to images. It's a documentation, not fiction, although words may be incidental.

K.W. The nearest equivalent is in literature. It's a similar collaged, incidental approach that Kate Millet uses in 'Plying' and 'Sita'.

M.R. Yes, although you're aware they're real people, you're also aware that there are two levels. Although the story is one of personal relationships: homo/heterosexual love/friendship, she gets to the core of similarity - breaking up; holding on; coming back; all those emotional forces and games. She manages to explore this on a general level. One thing I want to be able to do is to be able to use the personal in a way which makes people recognisable without feeling used.

K.W. Making images of intimate knowledge without exploitation? Is it possible?

M.R. It's easier to do this with images perhaps, than with words.

K.W. I'm wondering how truthful the art can be if I don't say everything. FEMIX is different from a real C.R. group because it's public.

M.R. It's C.R. raised to a symbolic plane which is accessible. I carry on doing it because I think it's possible.

K.W. Anyway, it's something we have to risk, because there seems to be no other way which doesn't immediately suffer cooption into Art - Propaganda, or Art - Avant-Garde Elite, - both concepts equally alienating to most people.

SOME Lady **gliders** think...
they're really **FLYING**

SUCCESS ON MALE TERMS IS INTERESTING BUT INSUFFICIENT. BRITISH FEMINIST ACADEMIC RESEARCH WORK, ON THE WHOLE, CONFORMS TO THE PRESSURE OF MALE TERMS OF REFERENCE. DISCUSSION OF WOMEN'S ART TAKES PLACE IN THIS PRESSURISED CONTAINER. THE TERMS IN WHICH ACADEMIC DEBATE IS CONDUCTED CAN TOTALLY NEGATE EVERYTHING THAT IS ATTEMPTED, BECAUSE THE LANGUAGE AND STYLES OF EXPRESSION USED TO DESCRIBE WOMEN ALSO CONFINE US.

K.W. Language defines and constructs art in various ways. This is why validation of feminist art is so problematic.

M.R. It's so difficult, because if you use a word that already exists, especially the written word, you give only a partial picture. Various art terms could be used to describe FEMIX: environment, assemblage, happening, event, collage, concrete poetry, improvisation, performance, installation, situation.

K.W. All these terms come from recent male-dominated art forms and that's what readily springs to mind, and yet none of these are apt expressions, because the emphasis in our work is on content, not form.

M.R. The nearest word to describe it's form is 'installation'. That's so new that nobody is exactly certain what it's about.

K.W. At any given moment language strategy must adapt. To invent completely new terms, which the dominant culture does not recognise, can lead to a ghetto effect, e.g. terms like 'sexism' have stuck, whereas such terms as HERstory have come unstuck, as usable terms in intellectual discourse. Some are available for shock tactics only.

M.R. Does that mean we have to translate feminism into terms they can understand?

K.W. No, we are further on now, than in the days when feminist content had to be dressed up in the language of the current avant-garde. The danger of dismissal is still there, but we are on the point of overcoming that danger, by producing a rival aesthetic system, created out of the very process of our work.

M.R. Process as art - a lot of arty lip-service has been paid already, so it's been impossible to emphasise materials as significant to content e.g. the 'roughness' of technique; work 'in situ'; diary + notebook format; found objects; documentary sociology, etc.

K.W. Examples of lip service: ART FOR SOCIETY, ART FOR WHOM, LIVES - in these exhibitions everyday reality was used in the vain hope that in itself reality will make art accessible. This approach used alone is of limited value, and when it uses other people's lives, verging on exploitative. A danger for us is that we nearly fit the trend, so the same risks apply. We try to use many other techniques besides a simple presentation of documentary fact. If we can be clear about what we're expected to conform to then there's a chance that we won't.

**MALE ARTOCRACY
IS IMPOTENT!**



FENIX ATTEMPTS TO MAKE A VISUAL EQUIVALENT FOR SMALL GROUP ENERGY. THE TRANSFORMATION PROCESS ITSELF IS THE ARTWORK, AS WELL AS ITS TRACES.

K.W. As a basis for cultural change the experience within C.R. groups has been shown to work both on a practical and a theoretical level.¹⁰

The massive outpouring of feminist literature has shown that experiments with new forms, both fictional and documentary, have come from using small group experience. The collective editorial process is based upon this, also experiments with style, for example 'Heresies'.

In the same way that women writers are altering the forms of literature to contain its new subjects, so we are interested in the formal aspects of feminist art. So far what women artists have done is to inject a bit of new subject matter whilst mainly working along current avant-garde methods of production. They have not altered the art form itself. Some have attempted group work, but so far these groups have been limited, working alongside each other as cooperative groups, but not as collectives. There has been little interaction in formal terms.

Tokenism has had an effect on the look of accepted women's artwork. In London, particularly, the work by women which gets into galleries falls into four main categories:

- (1) The Academic e.g. the R.A. Summer show
- (2) Abstract e.g. Hayward, Serpentine etc.
- (3) Conceptual (inc. photos) e.g. Hayward and some private galleries.
- (4) Performance e.g. mainly small alternative venues and, increasingly, Arts Council places such as Hayward, Whitechapel.

The interesting feature of the last two categories (THE NEW AVANT-GARDE) from a feminist standpoint is, that no challenge is presented to the usual phenomenon: woman as spectacle, but man is the voyeur of that spectacle.

It is this challenge which FENIX attempts to take up.

FENIX LESSONS

THIS METHOD (C.R. APPLIED TO VISUAL ARTS) HAS EVOLVED INTO A RADICAL FORMAL ATTACK UPON THE REVERED OBJECTS OF FINE ART, AND A QUESTIONING OF THE CONCEPT 'PROFESSIONAL' - IN TERMS OF PROCESS, PRESENTATION, SUBJECT MATTER AND CONTEXT. THE ESSENTIAL STRUCTURE OF A C.R. GROUP CONSISTS OF EQUAL PARTICIPATION BASED ON PERSONAL QUESTIONS RATHER THAN THEORETICAL CRITICISM. THIS LEADS TO A DRASTIC ALTERATION IN THE FORM OF ART.

K.W. The essential structure that we got from C.R. groups won't build into current art forms as they stand - I find my other, more traditional ways of working, less personally satisfying than the experimental group works because of this misfit between content and form.

M.R. That's an interesting point about my personal work too. One of the reasons I was making one small piece recently, (angry, and fed up with it at the end) was because I'd tried to do something to reflect my changed view of past personal history and failed. I'd mixed up the skills I had in a way which I had hoped would reflect this: photography, drawing, collage, sewing, but it just wouldn't contain the new content. It just wouldn't stay in there because I was still trying to fit it into a traditional art form, but it was completely frustrating because it just wasn't enough.

S.R. You have to work on your own stuff too though, often in traditional skills, because the progress of those skills is important, so that you won't have to worry too much about so called 'professionalism' when you have to put it together in a feminist context.

K.W. I'm very satisfied with the formal devices we've chosen e.g. the monochrome scheme, shared space, quick techniques such as found objects, collage, photos, tapes, because they really work aesthetically, and yet, are the outcome of the packed lives which dictate the speed. Even to anyone who doesn't know anything about this way of working, it could be quite expressive aesthetically; very visually exciting, which would create enough curiosity in the viewer for her or him to 'read' it further. It doesn't bother me if the art FARTS don't come.

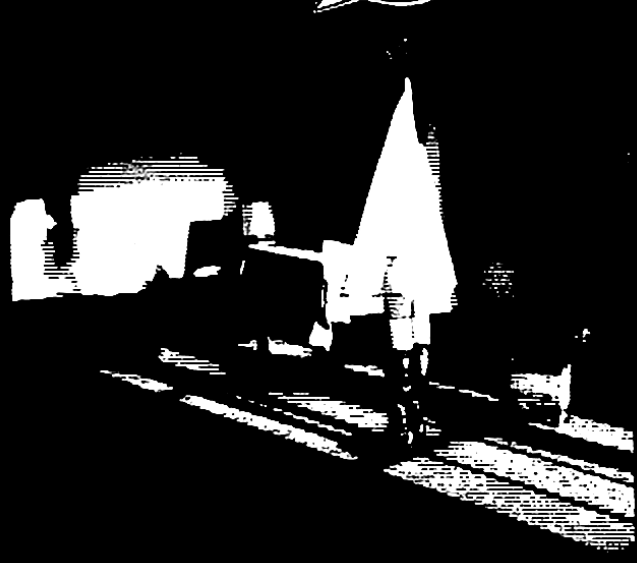
M.R. I think art critics experience of looking, is built up on a knowledge of art as it's been in this culture since the Renaissance and I don't see those aesthetic standards as particularly relevant.



PILOTING



doing it in
public, real
life art shg



WE RECOGNISE THE DIFFICULTIES THAT WOMEN ARTISTS WORK AGAINST IN SOME DETAIL, NOT TO ENDORSE THE ROLE, BUT TO ENCOURAGE OURSELVES AND OTHERS TO FIND SPACE WITHIN IT, IN ORDER TO MANOEUVRE OUT OF IT. A LARGE PART OF OUR PRACTICE CONCERNS PUBLIC ACCESSIBILITY FOR THIS REASON.

- S.R. The other reason for doing it in the gallery is because we want to do it in public. It's very important that it's the general public, and not just a specific art public who always go to art shows. We just want to be making the work, where people can see it and make comments, talk about it, where you can see their reactions. Then you know if it's going to work, if it doesn't, alter it. It takes a little bit of pressure off people not to have to go and look at specific objects with reverence. I felt, they felt, I think, as if they were coming into a workshop.
- K.W. I hate all that reverence given to fine art. I want to bust it all up! I really liked Liverpool. I felt very involved because people contributed so much. We are doing something with form, in response to those contributions which I think will be new.
- S.R. Yes, it's a process of collecting experience and collective work. We record the events and installation with tapes, photos, writing. The audience can see a progression from one gallery to the next.
- K.W. It's an image of a female life. We're not aiming at static complete perfection. It's an organic process.
- S.R. You don't have to keep on putting everything in and doing it the same way.
- K.W. The idea of organic process is something we picked up from the postal event. When we did that long series of exhibitions, we tried to play with it, display it in different ways.
- M.R. It was a good preparation for FEMIX, particularly the I.C.A. show, as a rehearsal of a way of working together.
- S.R. The postal event was about non-critical communication.
- K.W. FEMIX can be seen as a visual equivalent of a closed C.R.Y. group, as opposed to the more open, accidental group that the Feminist postal event became.

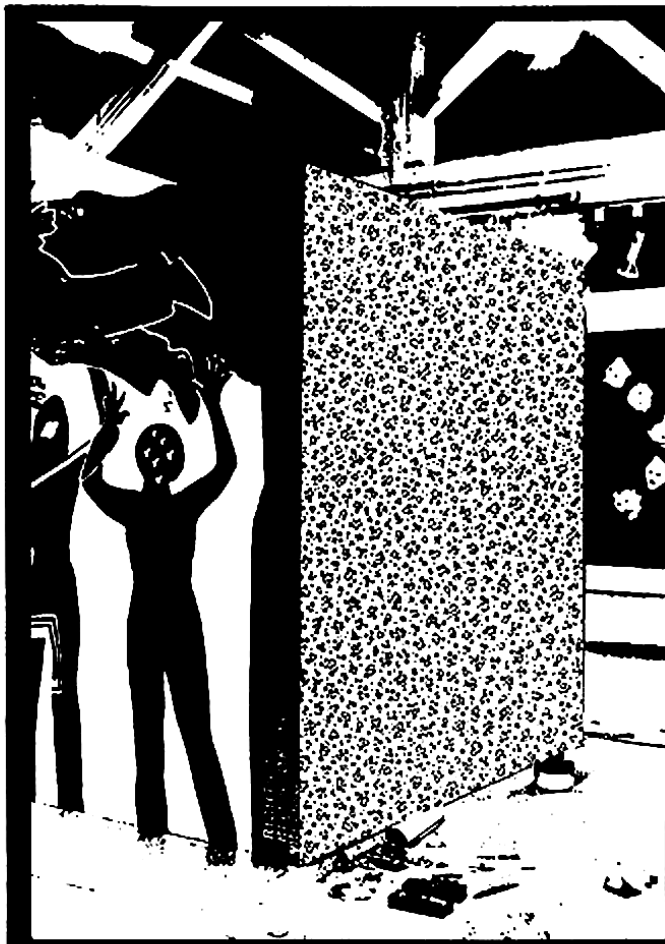
NOTES

1. I am indebted to Margaret Harrison for the use of this term - a slogan used in a women artists demonstration 1976, which protested against the inequality of opportunity in the gallery system.
2. See Studio International Womens Issue 1977.
3. A series of 9 exhibitions U.K. and abroad of work sent by post between women artists (started in 1974 by Kate Walker).
4. See 'Learning to be There' by Mary Michaels for an account of how consciousness raising relates to feminist art. Also Chicago p.70 'FRESNO WOMENS PROGRAMME'.
5. Although women have had access to art education in equal numbers to men, since the beginning of this century, the proportion of women artists represented in the gallery, art education and arts administration systems remain less than 4%.
6. Paris Biennale '79 for example or Hayward Annual '78.
7. 'Women are the New Left' by Monica Sjoo 1979.
8. Lippard writes on Chicago: "I am trying to deal with the same things (personal-political) writing an article on J. Chicago, who is integrating a very personal, often embarrassing content into her abstract form language. It is the sort of language I could only allow myself in fiction until now..."
9. Lippard on tokenism: "A lot of women artists have joined together, successfully, to bring more GG into the system....but if the art itself is indistinguishable from men's, nothing will change".
10. Right Women in May - a group work on rape, see HERESIES violence issue.
11. HERESIES
Each issue is given over to a specific theme e.g. the VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN ISSUE WAS WRITTEN BY A COLLECTIVE WHICH INCLUDED NOT ONLY ACADEMICS, BUT PROSTITUTES, JUVENILE DELINQUENTS, CHICANO AND BLACK WOMEN. ALL SOCIAL CLASSES OF WOMEN WERE REPRESENTED. WRITING OF THEIR OWN EXPERIENCE and also collective editorial pieces.
12. PHOENIX is a mythical bird rising from destruction FEMIX is the female version.



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GROUNDWORK 3

THESE PHYSICAL PROBLEMS AND THEORETICAL CONCERNS ARE EXPRESSED CONSTANTLY, AND FED BACK INTO THE ARTWORK. IT CONTINUALLY EXPANDS TO INCLUDE OUR RESPONSES TO THE PUBLICS QUESTIONS. AT PRESENT AESTHETIC PROBLEMS REVOLVE AROUND A DESIRE TO 'BREAK UP' THE WALLS, CEILING AND FLOOR BY OPTICAL ILLUSIONS: A NEED TO FOCUS THE ATTENTION OF THE SPECTATOR AWAY FROM EXPECTED IMPRESSIONS OF SPACE ON TO AN IMPRESSION OF A PSYCHOLOGICAL SITUATION.

S.R.

This is one of the great things about moving from one place to another. Some of it is accidental, spontaneous, you can see from experience which use of space will be more expressive.

K.V.

I see that as symbolic too - getting to grips with how we feel about our own experience as working mothers with three jobs: parent, breadwinner, artist; talking about it, making art about it. We're getting an increasing control of space, which is symbolised by the physical ordering of objects, materials and sounds in that room.



Origins of FLIGHT

THE FIRST POINTS WE DISCUSSED WERE CONCERNED WITH THE WORKING CONDITIONS OF WOMEN ARTISTS AND THE SMALL AMOUNTS OF TIME, SPACE AND MONEY AVAILABLE TO WORKING MOTHERS. WHAT METHODS HAVE WE ADOPTED TO FIND SOME ROOM FOR

MANOVA IN THESE CONDITIONS?

- K.V. I do various kinds of work. PENIX is one way of operating, because it fits in with the rest of my life.
- S.R. You can collect stuff in the small amount of time that you have. Then you can use the gallery space as a studio when you get together.
- K.V. Very few women have a proper studio anyway, unless they're reasonably mature/established and child-free or independently moneyed, middle class or aristos.
- M.R. That whole pressure, if you have kids, of keeping the place habitable for them and clean and safe. If you paint big, it's really difficult for kids to find anywhere to play. For instance say we had tried to make the life-sized figures that we made for PENIX in the living room, which is the biggest area we've got, the place is dominated by our artwork.
- K.V. I know lots of artists, female and male who might not mind that, they live in relative chaos. I always question the dominance of one person's standards and needs over everybody else's, especially those of very young children.
- M.R. I think women feel that worry and guilt strongly. For instance, think of all the precautions you have to take even when painting a chair, if there's a baby crawling around. A bloke might not feel obliged to do anything, but women are conditioned to feel obliged.
- K.V. Eventually he'd just get a studio away from the home. In the past these pressures made women want to stop doing their work. I think we're different, because we just make our work fit round the life.
- S.R. This is a way of forcing a situation which will give us space to do large work. It's only this way that the average working woman would get a chance. She can't afford extra space.



ASSISTANCE FROM
WEST MIDLANDS ARTS

HIRE FROM:
70 BLENDHEIM RD.
BIRMINGHAM B5 7TJ

PRODUCED BY

Richardson

65p

KODAK SAFETY FILM



→ 1:1A

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MALE OF THE

FACE IN THE

FLYING

FENIX^o is a travelling exhibition made by Monica Ross, Sue Richardson and Kate Walker. Ross, Richardson and Walker met at the Women Artists/Historians Conference of 74 (2). They have worked together subsequently, organising, writing and exhibiting within the context of the Women's Art Movement, at the point of its recent intervention in the Gallery System. FEMINIST POSTAL EVENT '76-'77 (3) was one example of this phase.

The concept of collective artwork is related, in FENIX^o, to the process called 'corrections', raising within feminist small groups (4), and also to the progress of the Women's Art Movement in Britain.

The development of the W.A.M. has been slower here than in some parts of Europe, and very fragile compared with its strong proliferation in the U.S.A. It has been forced to develop a theoretical basis, partly because the exclusion of women from art institutions has been firmer in Britain (5). In many cases the developments of women's art abroad have been easily assimilated into the main body of the culture, and sunk into the elitist category: 'avant-garde.' A few of these co-opted phenomena exist within the British artworld for (6), but the slowness of this process has given us the opportunity to explore alternatives and to sharpen strategy to a finer point. An outline of the practice in FENIX^o indicates this point of attack.

FENIX^o is made in situ at each gallery. The artists work publicly, improvising the installation for one week at each site, after which it is kept for a further period. It then travels to the next exhibition space where it continues to grow, building upon previous work. This type of working procedure as a feminist strategy is best described by extracts from a dialogue (recorded Birmingham May 1979) between Ross, Richardson and Walker.

THE GENERATION WHICH THIS TRIO REPRESENTS IS THE FIRST IN WHICH WORKING CLASS WOMEN HAVE HAD ACCESS TO ART EDUCATION. SOME OF THESE WOMEN ARE MAKING A CONSCIOUS COLLECTIVE ATTEMPT TO COMBINE MOTHERHOOD WITH A PROFESSIONAL CAREER (7) INDIVIDUAL CAREERIST 'SOLUTIONS', SUCH AS WE HAVE SEEN THROUGHOUT ART HISTORY DO NOT WORK IN THEIR INTEREST.

FENIX^o ARISES FROM A PARADOXICAL BACKGROUND: the education of women of working class origins in a pursuit which has been the prerogative of the leisured classes i.e. what is called 'FINEART'—mainly white, European, male and middle class.



Fenix^o PHOENIX